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SUBJECT: BRUNEI BRIEFING: AMBASSADOR TODD TALKS WITH BRUNEI, A POLITICAL PARTY RALLY, AND NEWS AND NOTES

AMBASSADOR TODD TALKS WITH BRUNEI

1.(U) In a new public diplomacy outreach initiative, Embassy Brunei teamed up with the country's most widely read newspaper, the Borneo Bulletin, in introducing an Ask the U.S Ambassador weekly editorial column. Ambassador Todd responds to questions sent by email or poised to him directly.

¶2. (U) To date, most questions have focused on higher education and studying in the United States. The questions correspond well to Ambassador Todd and Embassy's ongoing efforts to publicize and encourage increased educational exchanges and attendance at U.S. colleges and universities. Other topics and questions have ranged from the why is the consular waiting room so small to policy questions on the transition process between U.S. presidential administrations.

¶3. (SBU) COMMENT: Post has received extremely positive feedback on the column. Bruneians have expressed appreciation to the Ambassador and Embassy staff for the column. Interestingly, many in the diplomatic corps in Brunei have express grudging admiration for the expanded public outreach, which has focused more attention on US interests and policies. We hope to use the column as a stepping stone into more public outreach via blogs and other interactive media. End Comment.

THE POLITICAL PARTY HAS A RALLY, SORT OF

¶4. (SBU) On December 1, 2008, DCM and POL/MIL Assistant attended the National Development Party (NDP) official Flag-Hoisting ceremony at NDP Headquarters. (NOTE: The NDP is the only registered and legal political party in Brunei. End Note.) During his official address, NDP President Yasin Afendi, revealed there are currently over 30 NDP branch offices across Brunei. Afendi also spoke Malai Hassan Malai Othman - Chairman of NDP International Relation Bureau - participation of the USG IVLP during the Election 2008. Attendance was officially estimated at 400.

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: Other than the U.S. Embassy attendance, the world's democracies were not out in force for the event. Burma, Vietnam, Laos, and Iran were all present. All Western embassies chose not to attend. Most told us they just did not feel like sitting in the hot sun for the event. NDP officials tried their best to put on a political rally within the constraints of Brunei's political system. Loyalty to the His Majesty, the Sultan, was the key theme of the event. The NDP pins much of their hopes on growing as a political party in support of the Sultan. They believe they are carrying out the wishes of the Sultan in expanding "democratic opportunities." NDP has aspirations of being a true political party and members truly do believe in their cause. To date, their work echoes that of an NGO and they acknowledge they have much progress to make to become a true political party. END COMMENT.

NEWS AND NOTES

6) (SBU) Over the past weekend, local police broke up a prostitution ring operating out of two hotels in the capital. 21 Chinese national women were arrested, along with various men of differing nationalities. Post has learned that the women and men who are not Bruneian would be deported. There were no minors amongst those arrested.

7) (SBU) Customs and Religious Affairs officials continue to raid private parties. They have focused on the Empire hotel, amongst other gathering places. The context is in the search for "illegal" alcohol. The raids normally never result in arrests or confiscations. In one case, Post has learned that the Vienna Operetta who was in town for one of the rare public classical music concerts has vowed never to return after their private function at the Empire Hotel was raided. Post has read with interest about plans to develop the riverfront area across from the Embassy into a boardwalk to "improve nightlife."

TODD